

Panel: “State-Building and War”

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Title: *Die Opfertation*: Victimhood and Austrian National Identity

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Patrick Casey will graduate this May with *highest distinction* in the fields of History and German, having also taken—and having thoroughly enjoyed—a smattering of credits in half a dozen nominally unrelated fields. In the course of his studies, he has been named an IPFW Withers Scholar, has received an award for Excellence in Foreign Language for German, and joins Jessica Cortesi in being named one of the Outstanding History seniors. While studying, Patrick has also maintained full-time employ at JCPenney, which has not yet killed him. Plans for the future remain in flux, but one might reasonably assume there will be travel involved.

Abstract

Since the convening of the Austrian Historical Commission in 1998, the state of scholarly literature is all but unanimous: the classification of Austria as a victim collective was clearly at odds with historical reality. Where the preponderance of literature to this point has concentrated on deconstructing the Austrian victim myth, this paper analyzes its creation and the political exigencies which allowed it. It further characterizes the victim myth, not as the vindication, but rather as the creation of an Austrian Nation. This paper approached the question through two sets of sources; first, documents concerning Austria meant for the public; decrees, propaganda, and the like. Second, it examines the process through the classified orders and communicate of political and intelligence officers, military personnel, and diplomatic officials. While this paper makes use of long public Western sources, it was not until somewhat recently that Soviet archives became available, so this is amongst the first works to have Soviet perspective on Austria’s role in the war and later political struggles.

Austrian political identity in the wake of the Habsburg collapse was fluid; a popular referendum to unify with Germany passed overwhelmingly in 1919, but was blocked by the Allied Powers, who did not want to see a German resurgence. The Great Depression only deepened the crisis, so that “to all but a handful, the idea of an independent Austria was simply inconceivable.” Even after unification with Germany, American, British, Soviet, and Austrian elites all viewed Austria as a politically malleable state. In early 1943, the British Ministry of Information first proposed the Moscow Declaration, promising Austrians lenient treatment, should they aid in the Allied advance.

After the collapse of the Nazi regime in 1945, Austria was split into American, British, and Soviet zones of control. To avoid exploitation and a more vigorous denazification—which was seen as a likely pretext for permanent Soviet or American involvement—the Austrians began producing documentary “proofs” of victimhood, the most famous of which is the *Rot-Weiss-Rot Buch*. As Cold War tensions began to heighten, the Austrian public and the Provisional Government, fighting to avoid reparations and a second humiliating guilt clause, consolidated themselves more firmly behind the *Opferdoktrin*—the victim doctrine. The Soviets and the Allies could not refute the *Opferdoktrin*. In the first place, it effectively nullified the threat of a

future German reunification, which remained a concern in post-War politics. Additionally, while competing for influence in Austria, neither the Americans nor the Soviets wished to take a more aggressive stance and risk alienating the Austrian populace. As a result, the *Opferdoktrin*, while shielding Austrian Nazis and collaborators, opened a path to independence and neutrality for the Austrian people. Furthermore, in identifying with the myth of a resilient, but deeply wronged Austria, the previously apathetic Austrian populace was provided with a desirable corporate identity, which shielded them against repercussions and crowned them with the laurels of tragic heroism.

Bibliographical Note

In writing this paper, the author drew on a variety of sources. The topic of Austrian history being somewhat outside the mainstream in English speaking countries, the author did the preponderance of his research in the original German. The document sources used in this paper might be split into those intended for public consumption, and those which most certainly were not. In the first class was a series of documentary histories, compiled and published by the Austrian Provisional Government during the Allied occupation, which sought to prove Austrian innocence in World War II; the exemplar of this genre being the *Rot-Weiss-Rot Buch*, published by the state press in 1946. Other public sources included speeches drawn from prominent figures, various government declarations and accords, laws passed within the individual allied zones of control, and a series of public discourses between Austrian and Soviet officials on the fitness of Austria to govern itself. Among the sources not intended for public consumption were the personal papers of the chief American and British diplomats in Austria, American, British, and Soviet orders and reports dealing with denazification and the reappportionment of the German Eigentum, Soviet directives to the KPÖ (Communist Party of Austria), orders from Soviet military commanders, as well as the analyses and reports of Soviet political officers on the ground. In most cases, the author was able to find topic specific volumes of compiled documents related to his theme, which, with the addition of the online database and archives managed by the University of Innsbruck Institut für Zeitgeschichte, allowed him to perform a reasonably thorough investigation of his subject. Exciting though they are, the author could not have read the recently released Soviet documents in the original Russian, so a note of special thank goes out to Wolfgang Müller et al for their compilation *Sowjetische Politik in Oesterreich, 1945-55: Dokumente aus russischen Archiven*, and to Stefan Karner and Barbara Stetzl-Marx for their *Die Rote Armee in Österreich : sowjetische Besatzung, 1945-1955*, without which this would have been a far less intriguing—and less satisfying—project. The secondary literature on this subject is remarkably rich, and had seen a strong resurgence in the last twenty years. Of special note here are Günter Bischof and Anton Pelinka, whose prolific—not to say voluminous—and thoughtful treatment of Austrian historical identity and whose fearless challenges to the idols of popular memory proved essential to this paper.